



Facts About Sexual Assault and Harassment in the Military



The Department of Veterans Affairs uses the term “Military Sexual Trauma” (MST) to refer to sexual assault or harassment involving a female or male service member while in the military. Sexual harassment is unwelcome or threatening verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature. Sexual assault is intentional sexual contact (Unwanted touching or grabbing; oral or anal sex; sexual penetration with an object; sexual intercourse) without consent.

Sexual assault and harassment are among the most serious violations a person can experience. They are criminal offenses, punishable under the Uniform Code of Military Justice¹, and other federal and local civilian laws. Sexual assault and harassment impact mission readiness and undermine the military’s core values. Unfortunately, men and women in the armed forces may fall victim to sexual assault and harassment. In fact, incidents of sexual assault and harassment in the military are higher than in civilian populations, and seem to increase during wartime. Sexual assault and sexual harassment are traumatic events. Like other kinds of trauma, sexual assault and harassment often negatively impact the survivors for years after the event.

The Impact of Sexual Trauma in the Military

It’s difficult to give precise data on how common sexual assault and harassment are, because both crimes often go unreported. However, the Pentagon and Department of Defense (DoD) note that reports of sexual assault increased dramatically from 2004 (1700 incidents reported) to 2006 (2947 incidents reported). Historically, there are higher rates of assault during a war. Statistics show that 23-28% of women service members^{2,3}, are sexually assaulted while in the military, and 11% are raped. Some experts believe the figure is higher today, because these numbers were gathered before women’s roles increased in the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. A report published in 2006 found that 6.8% of active duty women were sexually assaulted in a single year. Statistics of sexual harassment of women vary, ranging from 34%-78% of military women.

¹Sexual harassment under Article 93: Cruelty and Maltreatment; Sexual Assault under Article 120: Rape, Sexual Assault and Other Sexual Misconduct.

^{2,3} Undersecretary of Defense. (2007). Department of Defense: [2006 Annual Report on Military Services Sexual Assault](#) [pdf]
Department of Veterans Affairs (2003) "Military Sexual Trauma Among The Reserve Components Of The Armed Forces"
American Journal of Industrial Medicine.
Sadler, Anne, et al. (2009) "[Factors associated with women's risk of rape in the military environment.](#)" As reported on PBS.com
<http://www.pbs.org/shows/336/fact-check-military-sexual-trauma.html>
Amy Street, Ph.D. and Jane Stafford, Ph.D. (date unknown) NCPTSD fact sheet: Military Sexual Trauma: Issues in Caring for Veterans http://www.ncptsd.va.gov/ncmain/ncdocs/fact_shts/military_sexual_trauma.html?opm=1&rr=rr145&srt=d&echorr=true
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ABC News online <http://abcnews.go.com/US/story?id=3797346&page=1>



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The Impact of Sexual Trauma in the Military (cont.)

While male sexual assault and harassment are vastly underreported in the military, one estimate claims 3.5% of male service members⁴ are sexually assaulted while in the military, and 1.2% are raped. A 2006 report found 1.8% of active duty men were sexually assaulted in a single year. Statistics of sexual harassment vary, ranging from 6-38% of men in the military.

Service members may expect to face trauma in the line of duty, like coming under fire from an enemy. But sexual assault or harassment is different. It happens during military service, comes from within your own ranks, but isn't related to your mission. Assault and harassment in the military may also differ from those in the civilian world because military survivors often live, work, or rely on their perpetrators. Because the assault or harassment happens where the victim lives and works, it's difficult to "move on" after a sexual trauma in the military. Instead, victims may have to keep living or working closely with their attackers, often without anyone else's knowledge. Victims may even have to rely on their attackers for basic needs, like medical and mental health care. In the war zone, victims' lives may literally be in the hands of the people who assaulted them. Historically, many sexual trauma survivors in the military say that they were not believed, or were encouraged to stay quiet. Some say they were blamed for what happened. Being "hushed up" can leave survivors of sexual trauma feeling ignored and alone. It can also affect their recovery. Sexual trauma can affect a person's mental and physical health for years. The consequences of sexual trauma listed below are all normal reactions but should be addressed if the symptoms interfere with your daily functioning, relationships, work, or self-esteem:

- ***Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)***
- ***Depression***
- ***Anxiety***
- ***Strong Emotions***
- ***Emotional Numbing***
- ***Problems with alcohol or drugs***
- ***Sleep Problems***
- ***Difficulty with attention, concentration and memory***
- ***Upsetting memories***

⁴Department of Defense: [2006 Annual Report on Military Services Sexual Assault](#) [pdf]

Department of Veterans Affairs, "Military Sexual Trauma Among The Reserve Components Of The Armed Forces"

Sadler, Anne, et al. (2009) "[Factors associated with women's risk of rape in the military environment.](#)" As reported on PBS.com <http://www.pbs.org/now/shows/336/fact-check-military-sexual-trauma.html>

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Men as Survivors of Sexual Trauma

While male and female survivors react in similar ways to sexual trauma, men often have a tougher battle with the stigma than women. Men are often less willing to seek support. Many male survivors admit they feel isolated, alienated from others, emotionally vulnerable, and insecure about their masculinity. Victims of sexual trauma are forced to submit, and often feel vulnerable and overwhelmed by intense emotions. Many sexual assaults of men involve more than one attacker, weapons, or forced participation—even if no immediate physical threat was involved.

For men, sexual assault can lead to much shame and self-doubt. It may also trigger negative self-judgments and cause male victims to question their masculinity. For example, male survivors contend with issues of:

- **Legitimacy** (“Men can’t be sexually assaulted,” “No one will believe me.”)
- **Masculinity** (“I must not be a real man if I let this happen to me,” or “My manhood has been stolen.”)
- **Strength and Power** (“I should have been able to fend them off,” or “I shouldn’t have let this happen.”)
- **Sexual orientation** (“Am I gay?,” “Will others think I’m gay and only pretended not to like it?”)

Men may feel confused if their bodies were sexually aroused involuntarily during the attack. Signs of sexual excitement during an assault are often out of the victim’s control. In many cases, the responses are muscular or involuntary. These reactions are not measures of pleasure or interest. In some cases, the assault may even be somewhat pleasurable physically—but that doesn’t mean that the victim asked for, wanted, or consented to it.

If you’re a male survivor, you are not alone. Seeking help from loved ones or professionals can help you overcome your shame and isolation. Seeking help takes courage and strength. Courage to face what happened, and strength to admit and overcome your vulnerabilities. But with commitment, discipline, and the right support, you can recover from sexual trauma.





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Women as survivors of military sexual trauma

Women survivors of sexual trauma in the military face unique challenges as well. Rates of sexual assault and harassment are higher among military members than among civilians. This may be linked to the fact that women are the minority in all the armed services. They are more often in situations where they could be targets of violence.

As the minority, women may feel they need to prove themselves. Female survivors may not be comfortable in the more traditional role of seeking help. Some female survivors worry that others will see

them as weak. They fear some may think they are just causing trouble or undermining the group's strength. Female survivors may also worry that speaking up will damage unity and morale, especially if their attacker is a co-worker or fellow service member. And because many women find it hard to break into the military "boys club," some worry coming forward will interfere with social and career opportunities. Finally, female survivors may simply fear they won't be believed or taken seriously. But, by remaining silent, they may become more isolated and have more difficulty healing.